

ANTA 502 Literature Review

Alien Continent: Representations of Antarctica in Film

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Alien Continent: Antarctica's Representation in Film

Most people never get to visit Antarctica to be able to experience the continent for themselves. Their view on the continent is instead shaped by how Antarctica is presented to them. Therefore, to understand how the world views Antarctica, it should be studied how Antarctica is presented to the world. There are numerous ways in which representations of Antarctica can be transmitted such as personal accounts, books, news media and television programmes. The medium that this literature review shall focus on is film.

This essay shall take a thematic approach to reviewing the literature instead of focusing in the individual movies, choosing five topics and seeing how they are presented from one film to another. Those themes are the environment and landscape, ecology, science, non-scientific human activity and international politics and cooperation. While many of these films contain within them gross factual inaccuracies, this review shall rarely point them out as the aim is to looking at what is presented, rather than the difference between the presentation and reality.

The Films

While there are numerous films that are set in Antarctica (see Leane), this review shall focus on fictional representations of the continent, so documentaries have not been included. The review shall also focus on recent cinematic releases instead of 'classic'

Antarctic films such as *The Thing* (1982) and *Scott of the Antarctic* (1948) and television mini-series such as *Shackleton* (2002). It would have been desired to sample a large range of genres, however it appears that only certain genres of films are attracted to Antarctica as a location. As a result, of the films reviewed two are family films, two are science fiction and the final is an experimental art-house film.

The first film *Eight Below* (2006) is a Disney family film following the survival of eight dogs wintering in Antarctica after they were abandoned, and the efforts of their keeper trying to get back to Antarctica to rescue them. It is based on a real life incident of dogs surviving a winter which occurred with the 1958 Japanese scientific expedition and was previously adapted to film in Japanese movie *Nankyoku Monogatari* (1983).

Oscar winning animated film *Happy Feet* (2006) is again a film aimed at families and follows the journey of Mumbles, an anthropomorphic Emperor Penguin who cannot sing and instead tap dances. Mumbles discovers being different is not bad and seeks out to stop the 'aliens' that are threatening the existence of his species by stealing their fish.

While the 'aliens' in *Happy Feet* are actually human beings, hostile extra-terrestrials hidden under the ice is a popular plot in Antarctic movies. Two movies surveyed by this review contain such a plot. The aptly named *Alien vs. Predator* (2004) is a union of the *Alien* and *Predator* franchises of movies and the main plot revolves around a group of human explorers caught in the middle of a fight between the two species in an ancient temple they found buried under the ice.

Also adding to the large body of aliens in Antarctica films is *The X-Files* (1998).

Although not set entirely on the continent, the action climax in the final act of the film is set in Antarctica. At the heart of the plot is a conspiracy about aliens, which the two lead characters – Agents Mulder and Scully – are trying to investigate.

Finally, *9 Songs* (2004) is a controversial British art-house film portraying the passionate relationship of two people who initially meet at a rock concert and part when one of them leaves. The film is experimental, cutting between rock concerts, the characters having sex and the male character reflecting on their relationship while working in Antarctica some time after the end of the relationship.

Environment

There are two aspects to exploring the first theme. Firstly, how the geography and the extremity of the environment of the continent are portrayed and secondly, how the film uses this portrayal.

Both *Happy Feet* and *Alien vs. Predator* open to a view of the Earth from space, narrowing in and then focusing on Antarctica, effectively identifying for the audience Antarctica's location and setting the scene. *Happy Feet* never bothers to give its audience a specific geographical location, but often cuts between scenes with a repeat of the view

of the world from space, continuously driving home for its audience the location of the film.

Being an animated movie, the landscapes are drawn rather than filmed, but are done so in a realistic manner. Further, while Antarctica is the character's home and the summer is portrayed as quite pleasant, the film does depict the difficulties of survival in such an environment having within it scenes of the harsh Antarctic winter and storms.

The temple of *Alien vs. Predator* is located on what appears to be a fictional island off the Antarctic Peninsular. As the explorers travel, the movie treats its audience to a sweeping view of the Ross Ice Shelf, but other than that, little attention is given to the geography of the continent. The film places an emphasis on the remoteness and inhospitability by having the lead character, a field guide, quit at one point over not getting her desired four weeks to train the rest of the team for Antarctic conditions, although the extremity of the environment is not responsible for any of the human deaths in the movie. The remoteness of the continent plays a role in the plot of the film, placing and keeping the characters in a situation where there is no readily available help or escape.

Eight Below gives its audience details of where on the continent the characters are located: in a small base in Victoria Land. The first half hour of the film then follows the journey of two of the human characters and the dogs on a meteorite-hunting trip to Mt Melbourne, with reference made to the McMurdo Dry Valleys. Later, the plot follows its

human characters to McMurdo Station and then later back through the Ross Sea and along the Victoria Land coast.

No film places a stronger emphasis on the dangers of the Antarctic environment than *Eight Below*. The film at the beginning follows the characters as they meticulously lay flags and check for crevasses, actions which are justified later when the film sees human and dogs alike suffer injuries and sometimes killed as a result of the cold and falls into crevasses, off cliffs and through broken sea ice. However, it does not go as far as to portray the Antarctic winter as it is. In the film, there is daylight in July.

The X-Files has little to say about the extremity of the continent. Agent Mulder is shown travelling over the continent alone in tractor and shady characters are able to maintain a base. The conclusion one could draw is that the movie portrays Antarctica as rather remote but still quite accessible.

Finally, the male character in *9 Songs* gives a commentary on Antarctica, providing facts and figures as to the size and age of the continent as the camera sweeps across the Antarctic. In this movie, Antarctica acts as a metaphor for the human relationship, particularly the journey of the ice moving from the centre of the continent and to ice shelf and eventually breaking into icebergs and melting which represents the journey of a relationship from attraction to break up. Thus the view of the continent that the film shows is that of ice - icebergs, ice shelves and the ice sheet – and very little else.

Ecology

Conservation and environmental protection in Antarctica is never far from discussions about the continent and it plays a role in particular in *Happy Feet*, which shows many creatures that live in Antarctica and the sub-Antarctic, including three species of penguins, skuas, leopard and elephant seals and orcas, all anthropomorphised. Further, the Antarctic ecosystem plays a major role in the plot of *Happy Feet*. It is the upsetting of the ecosystem, the removal of one link in the food chain – fish – by humans that is revealed to be the major conflict in the film. The film is quite explicit in the message, even having its characters using the term ‘food chain’ in describing the issue they face and at one point a Skua explains to Mumbles the food chain as an excuse for why he is about to eat him.

The impact of pollution in the Southern Ocean on wildlife also features prominently. Lovelace the mystic Macaroni penguin for a good portion of the film struggles for his life as he finds himself unable to breathe due to the plastic six-pack rings stuck around his neck. This struggle is prolonged and horrific and undoubtedly was intended to have an impact on the viewing audience.

Dogs are now banned in Antarctica, but *Eight Below* never goes into why or dares to explore the impact that eight dogs running free and hunting and killing native life (which occurs in more than one scene) could have on a fragile ecosystem. Neither does it ever explore the possible negative impacts of human activity on the environment. The film

shows at one point the remains of human activity (albeit, items that were abandoned after an accident) and also an abandoned Russian scientific station never cleared up, but these are presented without judgement, except for the abandoned base helping the dogs by providing food.

Unsurprisingly, the two science-fiction films and *9 Songs* give little attention to the Antarctic ecosystem. With the desolation being used as a metaphor, life cannot feature in *9 Songs* or it would undermine the metaphor film is trying to use, and the only life *The X-Files* and *Alien vs. Predator* portray are humans and fictional creatures.

Science

Science is the major activity that takes place in Antarctica. With this in mind, it is worth a glance at how film is portraying scientific activity in Antarctica, whether it is portraying scientific activity as having value or not or not portraying scientific activities at all.

Happy Feet has a somewhat negative portrayal of science on the continent to match its generally cynical view of humans (which shall be discussed in more detail later). The first mention of scientists is for humorous effect: a Skua describes scientists as aliens performing 'abductions' on native wildlife. It comes across to the knowing audience that these abductions are tagging and monitoring activities. However, until the final moments of the film the scientists are not seen or heard from. The scientists only become interested in the plight of the penguins once Mumbles is observed dancing while trapped in a North

American zoo, imply that science is largely ignorant of the life on the continent and will only become interested if the wildlife provides a form of novelty.

In *Alien vs. Predator*, the ancient temple is discovered through remote heat-sensing carried out by satellite. However, this is not carried out by a national programme. Instead the science is carried out by a private company, who also sends in the team themselves with apparently no cooperation from a national programme. The message is that science is being carried out on the continent, but on a for-profit basis.

Eight Below has a particular interesting take on science. One of its conflicts is a clash between an experienced Antarctic field guide weary of the dangers of the continent and an over-eager scientist willing to take risks in order to discover a meteorite from Mercury. As the film progresses, the scientist comes to not only comes to respect the dangers of the continent and the support crew, but provide valuable assistance in the quest to rescue the dogs. The film never bothers to explain the importance of the meteorite, other than it being the first of its kind (from Mercury), however, it does portray the scientists as being those with more power and influence over the continent, and the support staff being there to service the science.

The male lead in *9 Songs* is himself a glaciologist and describes the continent as the world's memory in a brief scene in which he examines ice-cores. The film does not explain his work further or give his work any relevancy or context.

Finally, in *The X-Files* the science is of ethically ambiguous and conspiratorial variety and has very little ties to actual scientific activity on the continent, rather it is focused on human-alien hybrids.

Other Human Activity

Throughout *Happy Feet*, Mumbles tries to find out who the mysterious creatures on the continent are. An early surprise is that as Mumbles and friends fall into the ocean with a collapsing edge of an ice shelf, jarringly red crane goes cascading off with them and sinks into the ocean. The audience watches along with Mumbles as a dancing hula-girl doll rises to the surface. The crane and doll providing colours in the film that had yet to be seen in the movie's colour palette: reds, browns and greens. Furthermore, the hula-girl is a symbol of warmer climates and acts as a sharp juxtaposition to everything previously seen in the movie. The message is clear: humans are out-of-place in Antarctica.

All through the film, the effects of humans are negatively felt. A penguin mystic has a six-pack rings stuck around his neck which he treats as a gift from the gods, until it starts to constrict his airway. The motivation for Mumbles through much of the movie is solving that there is a food shortage caused by 'aliens'. Nowhere is the destructive nature of humans more apparent than when Mumbles and his friends come across an old abandoned Whaling Station located on the ice. It's portrayed as a dark place, filled with old, abandoned wooden structures, with whalebones in the centre and blood on the ice.

Not only do humans not belong, but activities such as fishing and whaling are damaging Antarctica.

Eight Below takes a contrasting view of humans, instead of focusing on their negative impact on the continent it seems to take the view that while humans and any animal not native to the continent will have a hard time surviving, the act of survival is one of heroism and one that the film praises all the way through. The film also has a depiction of human life on the Antarctic, taking a look briefly at everyday life in a small scientific station. The scientific and support crew are depicted in a manner reminiscent to the way they were depicted in *The Thing* over twenty years earlier.

In a way, the *Happy Feet* and *Eight Below* represent different extremes in views on humans. While *Happy Feet* portrays humans as indifferent, buffoonish or negligent of the wildlife, *Eight Below* portrays them as heroic with respect for the continent and only the best intentions at heart. However, *Eight Below* ignores the negative impacts of humans on the continent, while *Happy Feet* is all about the negative impacts. The contrast between these two films in a way reflects the debate over human activity on the continent.

Alien vs. Predator has a character mention that time is short for the discovery of the temple because 'others will come' indicating that this film views companies competing over the continent and discoveries as commonplace. *9 Songs* does have a brief scene in which the glaciologist enjoys himself by walking around the continent, which is the closest thing to tourist activity presented in any of these films, and of course, *The X-Files*

has a secret base. However, none of these films seems to have an opinion on everyday human activity in Antarctica.

International Cooperation

Finally, Antarctica is a place of significant international cooperation. The final theme explored by this review shall be whether this international cooperation is seen in films about Antarctica.

Of note in *Happy Feet* is a short montage towards the end in which scientists interpret the footage of dancing penguins correctly to mean something is wrong with the Antarctic ecosystem. This information is then passed on to diplomats who debate a complete ban on fishing in the Southern Ocean. The purpose of the montage is not to be an in-depth debate about fishing, although it does illustrate division in the international system about what to do with Antarctica's living resources. Notably, the Antarctic Treaty System does not appear to feature in this montage. Instead, as a ban on all fishing is concluded the United Nations logo is displayed prominently in the background of the scene.

In *Alien vs. Predator*, reference is made to Antarctica being truly free, because it is owned by no-one. This is as far as either of the science fiction films delves into the subject of international politics and law.

Eight Below goes some way to depicting national programmes other than the US programme, with its characters at one point visiting an Italian Station where they borrow equipment without the Italians' permission. The film goes as far as to have scenes in which the characters are in 'Christchurch' (the fact the character is in a harbour at the time indicates the scene is actually set in Lyttelton, despite what the title card says). The Lyttelton presented by the film is vaguely reminiscent of frontier towns where people can barter for passage to Antarctica. While the film acknowledges NSF bureaucracy in Washington DC, Antarctic services located in Christchurch are nearly entirely ignored.

It appears that the political situation of Antarctica is largely ignored by films. While audiences can gain an insight into the ecology and the resources of Antarctica through films, the actual regime in place dealing with these matters is left unknown.

Conclusion

Antarctica being a remote and inhospitable environment provides filmmakers a place to look at the otherworldly (such as in *The X-Files*, *Alien vs. Predator* and *Happy Feet*) and the heroic (such as in *Eight Below*). It also in some cases provides a plot device to separate characters from each other or the outside world or as a metaphor to drive home the message of the film.

Films that use Antarctica for its remoteness or as a metaphor, such as *The X-Files*, *Alien vs. Predator* and *9 Songs* tend to not delve into Antarctic ecosystem or give anything

more than a cursory glance at the science conducted on the continent. From these films, the main image of Antarctica is a lonely, lifeless, isolated and extreme place. The two family films, however, present the continent as extreme but also go into considerable detail about life on the continent, whether native or not. The portrayal of humans in Antarctica tends to be positive or negative depending on the film, while all films except *Happy Feet* ignore the fragility of the ecosystem.

Interestingly, there is one thing that all five films have in common. It appears that if a person were to get all their information on the continent from films that they would have no idea about the legal regime governing Antarctica and the international cooperation surrounding the continent. The Antarctic Treaty System has a very low profile.

Having reviewed all five films, it is the two family films, *Eight Below* and *Happy Feet* that seem to give the best well-rounded representations of Antarctica, giving viewers insight not only into the environment, but also the eco-system and the roles of humans and science.

Word Count: 3 212

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